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ABSTRACT

The paper is a description of how one teacher structured a classroom for five seriously disturbed violent boys (ages 5.5 to 8 years) at a private residential and day school for emotionally disturbed students. Anecdotes are reported as well as the teacher's reflections. Changes in the teacher's original planned class structure while maintaining the same overall goals reflected the students' needs especially concerning nap time, the afternoon period, and the morning opening period. Since transitions were difficult, the teacher attempted to minimize them through moving as seamlessly as possible from activity to activity, keeping as many boys occupied for as long as possible with one activity, then slipping into the next. Enthusiastic student response to books and a decrease in number of serious or violent episodes were among the results of the teacher's flexible restructuring. Appended is information on the researcher's role and method and on school organization. (DB)

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# BUILDING STRUCTURE INTO A CLASS FOR EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED CHILDREN: ONE TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE

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## Introduction

Brighton school looks out over a very wealthy western suburb of Boston from high on a bend in the Charles River. Turning off the road and passing the small sign embedded in the stone gate, the outward appearance is one of orderliness and peace. The lawns and athletic fields are kept meticulously, and lead up to the graceful Victorian mansion painted pale beige, matched by a smaller, refurbished carriage house. Near the entrance stands a large renovated barn with a copper weathervane atop; close by there is a red colonial cottage, once servant's quarters and now a residence for children. Far from the road, a very modern building houses the school. Beyond the wooden fence, horses run and a large field stretches out and up a bluff over the river.

The grounds belie the activities and residents of the school, at least to the naive visitor. This is a residential and day school for emotionally disturbed, mostly violent boys. Nevertheless, it is very well kept, pretty and proper, unlike many other residential treatment centers; it is a far cry from any Dickensian images of orphanages or stereotypes of asylums. There are no barred windows, no broken doors, no graffiti. Trash is in strategically placed cans, flowers in beds and pots grow undisturbed. Actually, it is not a wealthy school -- it is simply on property acquired at the right time and at the right price, nearly thirty years ago. Its current, well-kept state reflects philosophy much more than money.

Visitors from public schools have often said, as they walk across campus on a sunny day and watch children playing kickball, or as they tour a classroom and encounter children working at science learning centers or pasting together the books they have just "published," that they are amazed at how "unstructured Brighton is." Perhaps they had not expected to see children at play or work, but had expected children in tortuous physical restraints or screaming obscenities. Yet, if one looks closely, one sees that wherever there are children, on the field, in the classrooms, in the lunch room, there are always adults casually, carefully forming concentric circles around them: some close in and directly involved, others slightly back, attentive to the activity and ready to move in at the first sign of need, and still others, going about their business but ever-ready should a crisis erupt. What seems natural is planned; what seems free is bridled. This outward tranquility is hard-won; it is a calm at the eye of a highly structured storm.

Often, the last time a visitor has seen a child was during a crisis at the public school. So, on one hand, it is a complement to say "Brighton looks unstructured": the reader of a novel hears the story and sees the images, but remains unaware of the careful crafting, the structuring, and the ordinary sweat that went into bringing the story to life. At the same time, these comments are perplexing: structure, especially the type one toils to achieve with disturbed children, seems so frequently misunderstood. Those who work in this school know that they only need wait for a few minutes and the veneer of self-initiated play and work will be shattered, the circles of adults will contract, and the job of restructuring the environment will begin again.

"Structure" is an over-used and under-explained word in education and especially the education of difficult youngsters. It is associated with good schools, good classrooms, and good families: "He came from a good family with lots of structure" or "She runs a structured classroom." We hear the word and our mind slips over it: we know what it means -- or at least we think we do. We rarely question what structure is.

Upon reflection, most educators would say that structure is the organization of the day, the explicit rules, and their consequences. Thus, they (hopefully) would agree upon the daily organization and the set of rules for behavior that they think are appropriate, and begin the process of helping children conform to them. Additionally, they would expect that the approach toward helping children to conform would be mostly an active and overt process: schedules would be printed and maintained both for the organization of the day, and within activities during the day; rules broken would be marked; consequences for inappropriate behavior would be meted out; rewards would be given. They understand structure as an observable component of a school program, an easily identified element in the "good" programs.

Working with troubled children, one realizes that helping children conform to a predetermined structure is immediately problematic. The social patterns, rules, and consequences that in other social situations seem reasonable, often are intractable with troubled children. Nevertheless, traditionally, mental health professionals have not questioned strongly the validity of the structures to which they ask clients to conform. Wherever there is a mismatch between client and environmental structures and requirements, attention is focussed most clearly on the client, and it is often incumbent on the client to do the

substantial changing. Structure, in this sense, is like a completed edifice in which the individual must learn to live, where walls, windows, and doors are firmly in place, and little can be altered.

The types and scale of the problems that arise in the attempt to make emotionally disturbed individuals conform should, and often do, call into question the appropriateness of immutable organizational patterns, rules and consequences. A completed building is lacking when it doesn't meet the needs of its inhabitants; so, too, with structure when it does not meet the needs of students. It is the emphasis on structure meeting the needs of the students that makes Brighton different. In the school program at Brighton, the academic, social, and emotional needs of the inhabitants determine, to a large degree, the structure of the program. "Structure," is not a completed edifice, but a cycle of building that revives every year as new inhabitants come to live. It is a cycle that begins with a foundation and a framework, a plan for a building and a set of rules for construction. Each September, the structure of the school is an edifice with no walls or windows, no roof: a room can be added here, a wall can be moved there, a window or a skylight can go or stay, depending on the need. The actual process of building waits for the input of the inhabitants. But, regardless of how the structure itself changes, it still attempts to conform to the foundation, tries not to place undue stress on the framework. Structural integrity remains the higher goal, but the process of negotiation between builder and inhabitant oft-times threatens even that goal.

The negotiation of what the structure of the school is to be is no easy task. In some years, the needs of the inhabitants were easily determined, and the structure went up fast (there was even time to landscape). Most years, though, find the structure somewhat unfinished, still in process by August 15, the end of the yearly cycle. One such year was this past one, 1988-89.

This paper is a description and analysis of how one teacher, Anne, began to structure a classroom at Brighton at the beginning of the long and difficult 88-89 school year; it is an analysis of how she shaped a learning environment from the chaos of the first months of school for five young, seriously disturbed, violent boys. My attempt has been to uncover Anne's thinking processes, the ways in which she analyzed the needs of her students and acted in response to those needs, and the ways she altered her expectations, the organization of the day, the subject matter to be taught, and the methods to be used. The formation

of a classroom structure, in Anne's hands, was clearly a customizing process. Although she began her work with the class having clear goals and a clear initial structure in mind, she constantly adjusted and re-worked her expectations and the class structure in response to living in the class.

I have tried to capture the dynamic nature of structure building in this classroom, the interpersonal and social dimensions, as well as the organizational dimensions. Here, Anne fulfilled a role of teacher as designer: she listened to and watched her students carefully to determine their needs, was responsive to their individual personalities, abilities, and disabilities; equally, she listened and was responsive to herself, her knowledge, her philosophy of education, her commitment to the broader goals of literacy and adjustment to society. She struggled to hear what both the boys were saying about their needs as well as what her own training and philosophy were saying to her regarding their needs. As a result, she introduced a variety of different and interesting stimuli for her students, activities and materials that she believed were suited to them. She put a premium on activities that are salient to the boys. Further, she altered the class organization, experimented with the way those activities and materials were arranged, tested to see what combinations made sense to her students and achieved her goals for their education, as well. Like a builder, she altered her plans to suit the needs of those who lived in what she built.

## The Struggle to Hear

Anne has a heightened ability to observe the children closely and an acute desire to understand their needs. Every conversation with Anne, regardless of when it was held in the school year, was marked by her attention on the individual boys. She zooms in on them, watches them very closely, looking for clues of what they are capable of doing academically, of what they can tolerate socially. She listens to and reads carefully the reports that others have given on the boys in the past, and she looks for present indications of the behaviors they saw. She asks whether past estimations of a child's ability or disability were as a result of the situation the boy was in, or whether they are organic to the child. She has a great respect for each of them as people, and she treats them with dignity.

This effort is not without its costs. The fall of 1988 was a time of unprecedented violence, disruption, and emotional chaos in the class. Struggle marked the first four months of the

school year for Anne, her classroom team,[1] and her students. She struggled with the behavior of each boy in her class, the behavior of the boys as a group, and the boys struggled with each other. For their age, these boys were some of the most difficult that staff had seen. The five boys, ranging in age from 5.5 to 8 years old, were also the youngest group of children ever at the school. The combination of their extreme youth and their profound disturbance and violence shocked even the most senior members of the Brighton staff.

This was a time of great internal struggle for Anne, as well. Once she began to recognize who these children were and what they were and were not able to do, she needed to make substantial personal adjustments. Accustomed to slightly older children who had already been somewhat socialized in school, and being a teacher who ordinarily set high academic and behavioral standards for her students, Anne struggled mightily over adjusting her expectations and skills to suit the needs of the children. But the hallmark of Anne's work is her personal knowledge of her students, and her ability to find a structure that suits them and their learning. As she described each of them to me for the first time, she was highly animated. She thinks aloud, and as new insights about the boys occurred to her, she seemed excited at the increasing depth of her knowledge.

> "Jason is a boy who before the age of six had been in nine foster placements and is currently a seven-day resident here. He came here because he was deemed unplaceable in a family setting. He was so disruptive and so dangerous. He's extremely impulsive, he's extremely aggressive. He's also very bright and very verbal...and very cute! But he's quick to become aggressive when limits are set on his behavior or when he becomes upset or angry. He has very low frustration tolerance and low self-concept and thinks of himself as a bad little boy. He also does a lot of sexual acting out and gets sort of silly and involved in sexually provocative kinds of stuff.
>
> "Paul is seven and a half years old and is extremely difficult in class because...well, he's a combination of a lot of things. He's very, very, very impulsive and very agitated all the time. He can be very disorganized and very confused a lot of the time. [He always asks questions or makes comments like] what day is it? Where am I? What day am I going home? What's going on? I want to be in school. I don't want to be in school. I hate school. I'm a stupid, bad, little, crazy kid and I don't belong in school. I like school. He has hard time sitting in his seat, responds very aggressively to any limits. For example, if he jumps out of his seat and

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1 Each of the six classrooms at Brighton is staffed by three individuals: a head teacher, who is usually a teacher with a M.A. in Special Education of Emotionally Disturbed children; a full-year, full-time teaching intern, who is usually seeking certification; and a milieu therapist, a trained child care professional whose responsibility it is to attend to the non-academic aspects of the school day.

I say you need to get back in your seat he'll say, "Fuck you bitch!" and run out of the classroom. You know, he looks like he's doing fine and he'll do something wrong and you'll give a calm verbal direction and he'll lose it completely and it will escalate into a major scene. And when he's tantrumming he'll look very crazy and very disorganized and says bizarre things and tries to hurt himself and has very long, involved kicking, spitting, drooling, banging his head, wetting his pants, very crazy looking tantrums that take two people to restrain him for at times an hour. And that happens on a regular basis! There have been days that he has been restrained for an hour at three separate times between 8:45 and 2:30.

"Samuel is eight and he's a pretty atypical kid in a lot of ways, a neurologically involved kid. He has very poor fine motor control, trouble with visual scanning and organizing his body...is physically awkward. He has clear expressive language problems...He's very easily distracted by anything in the environment...if another kid moves his hands or makes a noise...or something moves across the room, he'll impulsively start screaming. It can be (caused by) something very minute so that it seems like it's coming right out of the blue. Though my guess is there is something that set it off, it's something so small that a lot of times you just have no idea.

"Brian will be turning six at the end of November. So in most schools he would only be in kindergarten now. He's another bright, verbal, cute, appealing little boy. He's very impulsive and has a lot of trouble sitting still. Some of that is that he is very young. He is hyperactive but he's not as aggressive. A common scenario is he'll be sitting on his bench and he'll stick up his middle finger at somebody or whisper swear words to the boy sitting next to him, or poke the boy sitting next to him. He'll continue to do this despite verbal directions not to and he'll get a time-out. On the way to time-out he'll kick over the tray of magic markers which will spill all over the floor. He won't be able to calm himself down in time-out and he'll be removed from the room. He doesn't need to be physically restrained but will need to be physically held in a chair to keep him in one place. And he'll yell and scream and swear for awhile and eventually he'll settle himself back down and get into school. He's usually very motivated to be in school, excited and thrilled about whatever is happening. But has a lot of trouble keeping himself contained.

"Aaron is six and a half and a lot of times looks like the highest functioning kid in the classroom. And he probably is in a lot of ways. He's more able to keep himself together when other stuff gets crazy. He's also bright and verbal and pretty much academically where he should be, you know at a first grade level. Aaron is very oppositional. His general response to anything you ask him to do is "No I will not!" It can be the most benign thing at all and something that he really doesn't mind doing. It's sort of an automatic response to say no, like a two year old. Occasionally it escalates into a problem and occasionally he becomes physically assaultive around those times. It builds up. He becomes more and more verbally abusive and then he becomes physically aggressive. That doesn't happen often with him.

On their own, each boy was incredibly difficult to manage. Yet, more than any one boy's problems, Anne found the interactions between children resulted in extreme difficulties in the classroom and a feeling of chaos. A single silly or negative behavior from one boy would set off a chain reaction of negative and often dangerous behaviors among most, if not all, the boys. For instance, Paul, enthusiastic about a lesson and bouncing about on his bench, bumped into Aaron. Aaron hit him lightly on the back and Paul hit him back. Anne, observing this infraction of the first rule of the class (No Hitting), told them both they would have to sit quietly for three minutes in their places as a consequence. Paul jumped up and started to run from the room. Cathy, the assistant teacher, grabbed him by the wrist as he went by. With this he began to scream, "Fuck you! Leave me alone! Fuck you!" Samuel, susceptible to this kind of stimulation, began screaming. Paul, escalating with the power of his own voice coupled with Samuel's, grabbed his crotch and yelled obscenities at Samuel, who then began to shriek "FUCKER!" Items got thrown, a chair knocked over. Aaron began to wander about the room, and Brian, who was already in time-out on the other side of the room began demanding to know what was going on. The noise and level of tension in the room soared. The three adults each ended up with a child held in their lap, or placed in a chair and restrained there. Confusion and noise reigned for what seemed a very long time, but was only a few minutes. However, the instructional period never restarted, and over twenty minutes were spent calming children down, bringing them back into the classroom, and starting a new lesson.

In the situation just described, and in almost all situations of its kind, Anne does not see the reason for the disruptions or violence solely in the behavior of the children. Having thought the situation over and struggled with herself, she saw it from a different point of view: she realized that, in part, the trouble began because she had asked the children to do an inappropriate learning activity, given their level of understanding. She had acted from the wrong assumptions about what they could assimilate.

In the lesson, Anne had attempted to teach about the five senses through an experience with four different kinds of apples. She expected the boys to notice that the apples had different colors, shapes, and sizes, had distinct smells, tastes, etc. However, once the first apple was given into their hands, the lesson went awry. Although they had many things to say about the experience, the boys became overwhelmed by Anne's attempt to organize

their comments by the categories of sense. For instance, she would ask what the apple looked like, but they were more desirous of reporting what they felt or smelled. She explained to me what she learned about the boys (and herself) from her mistake.

> "...This is a lesson that I've done at least twice before with other groups and it was extremely successful and the kids loved it and they were totally motivated to eat the apples [as a reward in the end] and it was fun and exciting and they filled in the whole chart and it was a great lesson! So I sort of was a little stupid in saying, "Well this is a great lesson that I've done before and I don't really need to think about it very much. I can just sit down and do it off the top of my head." And didn't really think enough about how different this group is from the group I had last year. And how just because it was really successful last year...These guys couldn't pay attention to four different apples and four different senses and what the difference between seeing and smelling and touching is. What doesn't look like a complicated task at all was much too complicated for this group in a way that it wasn't for the group last year. And I think some of the problem with why things fell apart...and I mean things fall apart sometimes even when I think the lesson is great!...but in thinking about this afterwards I felt like I wasn't as well organized as I should be for the needs of this group. And that when I did it over again a second time, we didn't deal with the different senses, we didn't talk as much in the beginning, we sort of looked at the apples, we talked about what color they were, we passed them around, we cut them open, we looked at the seeds, we looked at the inside. We touched them, we smelled them, we ate them, and it was great...you know? But we needed to cut out like 25 steps. And that's the kind of thing that happens with this group a lot. That I've always taught the youngest kids who were emotionally disturbed and learning disabled and I felt like I had already pared everything down to the barest minimum. And now, with this group I need to go twenty steps below that. I remember thinking that I was glad we would see this on the videotape because my reaction afterwards was that I was some of the problem, that my expectations were wrong. And that I forgot how much younger, more impulsive and unable to sit still and listen these guys are than even the group I had last year."

Paying attention to the boys and their needs was the first step in forming structure in the class. A second, simultaneous step was Anne's attention to herself, her philosophy of teaching, her thinking, her biases, and her technique. She looked carefully at the interaction of her own belief and knowledge with the needs of the children. Anne's commitment to her teaching has the quality of mission. Teaching disturbed children is a vocation to her, an outgrowth of a personal and political belief system that directs her to the social justice aspects of education. "What could possibly be more important than teaching?" she says earnestly.

> "...It wouldn't be worth doing if they [her students] were always going to be at Brighton for their whole lives. Like who'd care, you know, how much socially appropriate behavior they learn, and if they learn how to read and do math and those kinds of things? I think that there is always in the back of my head the thought and the hope that at some point down the road they are gonna go to some more normal setting."

Her hope that they will someday go to a more "normal setting" propels her toward setting more normalized goals for their behavior and their school work; Anne sets high standards for emotionally disturbed students. She prides herself on her ability to plan "neat curriculum," fun ways to teach reading, math, and general information like the calendar, telling time, and describing the weather; she places high value on working hard. She puts an emphasis on productive work and no amount of personal difficulty excuses a boy from his responsibilities. If a child has behavioral difficulties during an instructional period and must be removed from the room, he not only looses his points for the period, the lesson must be made up during his free choice time. She conducts a full lesson during that make-up time, the same one the boy should have had earlier. She does not modify the lesson, she does not give in often to pleas for clemency. School and learning are extremely important.

She has taught at Brighton for three years, and prior to that, worked at a camp for disturbed and learning disabled children for five years as a counselor and supervisor. She has extensive experience with difficult children. Ordinarily she is confident teaching appropriate classroom conduct and she does not shy away from teaching the values she thinks are important for children. She is seasoned at managing difficult behaviors. When she speaks of learning, she speaks the language of a dedicated early childhood educator. Since she believes that the children have futures, she tries to teach in a way that builds on their strengths, and thereby remediates their deficits.

> "...creative, developmental learning can be fun...you can focus on strength and health rather than on pathology. And you can teach skills and competencies. That can be the most therapeutic thing of all."

But this group thwarted many of her efforts and was a source of major frustration. First, they challenged her ability to keep them safe. The group dynamic that caused so many in the group to erupt at once risked the safety of adults and children alike. Anne teaches best in small groups, stopping and addressing individual difficulties as needed; she is a patient and masterful at redirecting negative behavior into positive behavior while remaining neutral herself.

For instance, on occasion as part of a school-wide science program, a group of naturists would visit with wild, live animals. On one such occasion, while attempting to engage three of the boys in an activity wherein they would tell her what they had enjoyed about the live animals that had visited the room earlier that day, Brian became negative and disruptive. He began to squirm in his seat, yell out "NO!" when Anne would ask a question of the group. This behavior was of the type that often began whenever Anne would attempt a standard group presentation. It was the type of behavior that was very contagious and could spread in a split second to the whole group. As Brian squirmed and yelled, Anne said nothing to him, didn't even look at him, but instead called on Samuel who was obviously willing to engage. Over the din, Samuel gave a fun answer -- he liked the dogs because they reminded him of his own. Anne praised his answer and made a minor sensation out of putting his answer on the chart. Brian, not to be outdone by Samuel, launched his hand into the air, ready with an offering of his own. Anne, not turning to him but continuing instead to write, said simply, "Brian, I'm glad you have something fun you want to tell about." She immediately listened to his response which was so full of fun things, she had to say, "Wait! Wait! You're going so fast, I can't get it all down!!"

At face value, the action she took seems no more special than any teacher would take in a similar situation. But in fact, she took a great risk ignoring Brian and speaking to Samuel. Often, ignoring him could cause Brian to escalate his problems further, to poke a neighbor, tip over a chair, or jump up to run out. Also, there was no telling whether Samuel was going to say anything interesting enough to make an issue over and draw Brian into the discussion. But Anne sensed that the tone of the room was right to redirect Brian's negative energy. "Tone" is important to Anne in making decisions of this kind. The tone of the room is something she feels in her gut, it is the sense she gets from the boys that tells her how much control she must exert, or whether she can try something new. For most of the time during the fall, the tone was just chaos, and the situation described above could easily have turned into a major disruption. Brian could have run from the room, Samuel could have begun to scream and flap his arms, and Aaron could have goaded them both on in his quiet way.

With so many troubles happening simultaneously, she could not deal with any one child adequately, it was difficult to stay neutral. Even though she believes it is "therapeutic" to

learn, she was having a very hard time getting this group to learn in any familiar way to her. She was accustomed to boys having trouble, but she had always been able to address the boys individually. Never had she had so many troubles happening simultaneously.

> "...nobody's needs are getting taken care of in the best way because everything feels so chaotic. I think that is pretty much where my frustration stems from with this group...feeling like I'm not taking care of what any of them need as best as I could...there is so much happening at once...[for instance] if Paul was having trouble and the rest of the group was ok, I could be dealing with Paul in a more therapeutic way. If Samuel was shrieking because he was nervous, and the rest of the group was in control, I could be dealing with Samuel in a more therapeutic way. But...when it's all happening at once I can't be dealing with any of them in the way that I would like to be dealing with them because I need to be juggling so many things at one time. And [I am] trying to preserve the classroom space as a safe, calm space -- even if that means that four out of five need to leave it and then gradually come back one at a time. But...this space needs to be preserved as a calm safe place where learning happens and where crazy outrageous behavior can't happen."

In addition to the children being more violent than she'd experienced, they were also not as academically advanced as others she had taught. Anne had always taught children a few years older than these boys. Even though these boys were not learning disabled, it disappointed her somewhat that the children were at a kindergarten and pre-school level of academic and behavioral functioning. As a result, she was basing her planning on what had worked in the past, and not yet on what she had learned from the children she currently was teaching. When she saw that her lessons were failing, she had to rethink her curriculum. After a particularly difficult lesson, we talked at length about her disappointment over having such a young class.

> "...in some ways, the kind of education this group needs is more what one would ordinarily find [in] kindergarten [and] pre-school. And I'm more used to, *or like doing better*, what's first, second grade. I mean...what I like doing better is more appropriate for first and second graders than for kindergartners. I like having the nice little organized charts...we come up with this product...And I'm too product-oriented for kindergarten! Which is one of the reasons that I'm not a kindergarten teacher...[I'm] used to kids I could push to that next level of thinking, I guess. I think..."well this worked last year and I had crazy learning disabled kids last year." And sort of forgetting to make the leap down to where these guys were...[and] immediately afterwards...thinking, this was a bad lesson."

This quote is revealing of the tension within Anne and how she thinks. She has a particular preference for who and how she wants to teach: yes, she wants products, she wants to

push students forward to the next level of thinking. Yet the needs of the boys take precedence, and if she does not "leap down" to them, her lessons will be ineffective and they will not learn. It also reveals a key element in her teaching: She is different from many teachers of emotionally disturbed children who place their greatest emphasis on teaching new social behaviors. While not denying the emotional and social difficulties of the children, Anne places her emphasis on the lesson itself, the content and methodology, the cognitive as well as the psychological. She has to "leap down" to them, she has to find what works with them. She acknowledges immediately that she might be as much a part of their problem in learning as their emotional difficulties are.

> "I'm constantly critiquing what I'm doing...the group has been so out of control most of the time and...other people who have been at Brighton even longer than I have said, "Oh my God! I can't believe that group!" And "I don't know how you deal with them every day." And "This is the most difficult group I've ever had in the art room!" And blah blah blah! So I know it's not me. But at the same time I'm constantly knowing that I *do* need to change what I'm doing and that there *are* things that I can change to make it better. So I'm...constantly replaying that in my head."

As frustrated as she was that she couldn't teach as she would like, she kept the needs of the children uppermost in her practice. She admitted freely "that there *are* things that I can change;" she had the ability to place her ego aside; she did not rely on only what has worked in the past. Perhaps this self-critical character trait, more than any other, combined with her intense focus on the needs of the boys to compel her to structure and restructure the environment.

When she realized early on that success with this class required adjustment, she adjusted her personal desires, she decided against being so "product-oriented;" she adjusted what was taught and how it was taught. At the same time, though, she did not construe the need to adjust as synonymous with a reduction of expectation. She knew from getting to know the children that they did not need to be taught less, just differently; she required *different* expectations. Yet, the transition was a gradual one, not a sudden realization that meant an overnight change.

## Altering the Plans

By mid-October, Anne had begun to realize that portions of her original schedule for both morning and afternoon activities did not make sense for the children. In late August, when she had set the schedule, she was unsure of the boys' academic abilities, and she viewed

the first month of school as a diagnostic period. She planned to adjust the work she was asking them to do once she was more sure of what the were capable. She had not expected to rethink the rhythm of the day and to change major portions of the schedule, though. It was not long before she realized that was exactly what it would take to build the right structure with these children, and so that was what she chose to do.

In the original schedule, the children began arriving in class at 8:45 and were given their "word folders." The idea was that while others were still coming in, boys could work quietly learning and coloring their "word for the day." After 15 minutes, when all were settled and work was checked, the adults would conduct a transition to morning meeting. Boys were asked to sit quietly on their bench and, when they were ready, a period of talk was planned to begin the day, to teach language skills as well as general information. Talk was about their evenings and what they had done, the date, the weather, any special holidays or announcements, etc. From this activity, boys would be divided into two groups for math, a hands-on, active, adult-directed period where boys would use manipulatives and games to understand numeration, and later, estimation. When math was through, Karen would take some of the boys for recess, leaving Anne and Cathy to split the remaining boys between themselves and to teach individual reading. That being completed, the groups switched and Karen took the other boys for recess while Anne and Cathy taught reading to two new individuals or pairs. Once all boys were back in the room, Big Books time commenced, another active, language and reading-based period. Lunch was the next order of business for half the group, while the other half was to take a nap. Anne reasoned that had they been in kindergarten in a regular school, they would have had time for a nap. The groups switched a half hour later and one rested while the other ate. After lunch was writing period, originally planned as a language experience period: emphasis was to be on oral language and story-telling, drawing and building or watching a fun demonstration, than dictating what had been done; positive experiences in creative expression. After this period was finished, science or social studies lessons would be held on alternating days. These lessons were planned to be on civics, safety, the environment -- typical first grade lessons. Finally, at 2:00, the children had "free choice." If all their work was completed, and their behavior for the day had been acceptable, they could choose what they wanted to do.

Anne realized that even under the best circumstances, acclimating to this organized, highly academic schedule, is very difficult. To start with, there are many transitions, which are difficult for most children, but necessary in order to teach individualized lessons in reading. Additionally, the classwork that she expected the boys to do was difficult -- it was reading and math work based on extensive testing and observation. Content and expectation were not reduced on account of the boy's disturbance. For the first part of every school year she expected adjustment difficulties with her students and a certain degree of chaos attending the setting of "appropriately high standards."

But, it soon became apparent that particular parts of the day were more chaotic than others, and that the level of disruptive behavior indicated deeper distress than she expected. Lunchtime/naptime was the first period to be assessed and altered. Leaving the classroom for a noisy lunchroom where other classes were eating was difficult for these easily stimulated boys; eating was an even more difficult task for them. They had few good eating habits and Karen would need to spend substantial energy directing and redirecting what and how the boys should eat. Lunch became another instructional period held in the midst of a loud lunchroom. The transition back to the classroom was chaotic and often violent, with as many as three boys in serious trouble at one time. Furthermore, naptime didn't work for the boys who remained in the class during the first period (they were hungry and wanted to eat), nor did it work for the boys in the second period (they were too stimulated from lunch and the trip back). The trouble spilled over into the afternoon and it would take a long time "to gradually pull back together." Anne rearranged to have all children go to lunch together and to have them sit at two tables, each table with a different adult. She reasoned that if disruption was going to occur, at least it could be localized after one period instead of two. Also, two adults could teach eating habits better and monitor the transition to and from the lunchroom, as well.

Since naptime did not work either, Anne did away with it altogether. She used the time after lunch for read-aloud. The children loved being read to and were able to use the time to rest and regroup after lunch. They were occupied by the story, as well, and this allowed Anne to use a variety of books to teach more about language and even content. As the holidays approached, books about Halloween, Pilgrims, Thanksgiving, and the like, were standard fare.

The second period of time to be assessed and altered was the combined period of the half-hour scheduled for language arts and the half-hour of social studies or science. This configuration had suited the older children she had taught in the past. But it became increasingly clear that, for these children, the demarcations of time by specific content was artificial. Perhaps they were artificial for Anne as well. By thinking of the afternoon structured by content, Anne felt responsible to cover the curriculum. She was not able to address what she thought were the real needs of her young students:

> "...labels of science, social studies, art, language arts seem very artificial at the level these kids are at...a lot of what they're doing...all of it needs to be experiential, hands on stuff. All of it is increasing their language skills. All of it is increasing their experience of the world. It seems sort of artificial to separate it into distinct blocks of curriculum development at this point...I was feeling like it didn't make sense to have [language arts] be a specific thing that happened *every* day for half an hour...it didn't make sense to have a writing period or a language arts period as a regular part of the schedule. But that we would have different kinds of language arts experiences as well as science and social studies experiences within that afternoon block of time."

She elaborated her point from a developmental point of view:

> "...in terms of their attention span and the best way to do curriculum with kids this young I've been thinking a lot...the curriculum that makes mores sense for them developmentally (and in terms of their behavior)...becomes much more of an integration between science and social studies and language arts and art and all of those things...that whole afternoon block has sort of merged together. Rather than [be] two separate activities, it's often actually been sort of one activity that incorporates a lot of those different things...Is it a reasonable expectation to have 8:45 to 2:30 packed with academic activity after academic activity after academic activity? Coming back after lunch and having a thirty minute language arts activity and then a thirty minute science/social studies activity...was not a reasonable group expectation.

Slowly, as she saw the children for who they were, not who she expected them to be, she shifted the schedule and the plan of activities to a pre-school/kindergarten style afternoon. The children responded better, felt less pressure to do what they didn't yet understand or feel able to do. At the same time, Anne eliminated the confining feeling that half-hour periods devoted to the same thing every day had left her with. She felt freed to address the children with what she saw as the sensible approach. The content remained science, social studies, and language -- but she taught it more in tandem with their rhythms. Her attitude toward the work became substantially different.

> [I'm not] trying to do it all every day, not trying to accomplish it all as quickly as I might have last year. [I'm] doing sometimes language arts things, sometimes science things, sometimes social studies things. [For language arts and writing] the goals are still there. The goals in terms of ...you know by the end of this year, the three kids who wouldn't be in kindergarten [the older three children] I want them to be writing... I want them to be writing stories. And the other two kids I want them at least to be telling stories and maybe doing some writing. That's been the same goal. My feelings about how realistic it is go up and down a little bit. I think some of the question has to do with this group balancing out each individual kids academic, cognitive potential versus the behavioral, social needs kinds of things. I mean each boy in this group, if I put him in a room with one teacher all day long, could be making more progress academically, probably, in some ways. If they had undivided one to one attention to be doing it. But at the same time, its equally, if not more important in some ways right now to learn how to be functioning in a group and to do group lessons and things like that. So some of it is figuring out how to get them to do what they are capable of doing, at the same time it is keeping in a group and having reasonable behavioral expectations for the group.

Anne did not relinquish her expectations for the children. She was confident they would write stories in the end (although her confidence went "up and down"). Perhaps they would take a little longer to get there. But, true to character, it was important that she balance "academic, cognitive potential versus the behavioral, social needs." This required patience on her part, a reining in of her tendency to be "product-oriented" and a focus on "figuring out how to get them to do what they are capable of doing." Consonant with her character as well, she returned to what the children were revealing to her in order to figure out what to do. She said, "I needed to find ways to get all those experiences and all those goals done differently." A new and customized structure grew from that need. But the over-arching goals of the year, to have children write, read, and become acclimated to classroom living, remained.

By late November, she had assessed and changed the first periods of the morning, too. Word time and morning meeting were times of violence and disruption since it was exceedingly difficult to settle the boys in. Either they had had trouble at wake-up time or breakfast (3 of them lived together in the residence), or some other difficulty had happened between breakfast and the beginning of class. Thus, when the boys entered the room and were required to begin a quiet, organized activity, they would rebel. Anne changed the requirement: now as soon as they came in, they could choose any quiet activity, the computer, games, a book, or their word folder. Each morning, this time would continue for awhile, until the "tone" of the room was conducive to morning meeting. Then one by

one, the boys would be asked to put away their work, and join each other on the benches for morning meeting. A formal, announced transition would not take place. Anne's goal was to move as seamlessly as possible from activity to activity, keeping as many boys occupied for as long as possible with one activity, then slipping into the next.

As late as April, Anne was still adjusting this period, changing individual children's schedules instead of the whole group's schedule. For instance, Jason continued throughout the year to have major behavioral problems during transitions or any activity that required more than two children. His behavior would become so difficult that the other boys would become involved even though they had started their own day positively. Finally, he was not required to attend the morning meeting with the whole group, but was given one to one attention on the far side of the room while it went on. This type of arrangement put a stress on the adults in the room. For as much time as possible, the three adults tried to be with all the boys. The teacher-student ratio was stretched thinly in the morning, but the other boys were doing well enough to warrant the risk. By that point too, the afternoon was loosening up again. Beginning in January, adjustments Anne had made in the afternoon to language arts and science/social studies were changing back to her original schedule and goals, at the request of the boys themselves. Formal writing, science, and social studies classes were beginning to take place. The structure in this classroom was continually shifting in response to changing needs.

## Salience and the Taking of Opportunities

With all of the difficulties the boys had from the first day of school, the one thing they were good at, the one thing that they loved to do was listen to books. Anne had not anticipated that they would become enrapt with books. When she consolidated lunch and made 12:00 - 12:30 a time for read-aloud, she created the most successful whole group activity of the day. All the boys attended to the story and actually did use the time for rest. Not every day was calm, and all boys were not always present (usually those who were not had gotten into trouble in the transition after lunch), but the difference in the boys, thumbs in mouth, leaning forward to see every picture and to hear every word, was quite remarkable. Teaching these boys to be literate was one of Anne's first goals. By taking advantage of the opportunity presented by the boy's love of books, she not only quelled a storm in the middle of the day and gave the boys more of what they liked, she added substantially to the time spent on language and reading. In rearranging the

schedule, she increased the total time spent listening to, or doing group activities with, books from the half-hour spent with Big Books to a full hour every day. Since each boy received one-to-one or two-to-one formal reading instruction for a half-hour every day, the addition of read-aloud meant Anne spent 35% of the day on both decoding and comprehension activities in reading.

In general, the boys retained the information from the books, and with more information, they began to talk more about content. One day around Thanksgiving time, a book Anne was reading about Pilgrims mentioned that the first Thanksgiving feast went for three days. The next day, Anne was reading a new and different Thanksgiving book. When it came to the part where a feast was happening, Jason yelled out, sounding like any first-grader, "And it happened for three days!!" Anne, surprised and pleased said, "Yes, Jason! That is good remembering!!" Emboldened by his first attempt, he later talked about the dangerous mushrooms that were pictured in the book, and how he hoped the Pilgrims did not eat the mushrooms. Anne responded to his worries, and a short conversation ensued.

Later, Anne pointed out that his comments were important: they were his attempts to talk *about something* else. It was a small discussion, she admitted, but the beginning of a trend, she hoped. She saw this small interchange as a new structure on which to build, a new way to increase the connection of the boys with her, with the classroom, with learning, and with each other.

Reading was enjoyable, but certain subjects were truly capturing the boys' imaginations. When she realized this, Anne placed more of that kind of thing in their path. She told me that there are "these really salient things...they had been powerful or exciting or different experiences" that the children responded to: the naturists came with animals periodically, the children all went to a hands-on museum, Thanksgiving arrived, they watched filmstrips about nature and eventually became excited about dinosaurs. Anne would couple these exciting experiences with some writing and language activity. The more writing they did, the more they wanted to do. For instance, when a filmstrip was very interesting and successful, she would ask the boys to draw a picture of their favorite part. They would then dictate a sentence to her or to another adult, who would write it underneath the

picture and give the filmstrip a new title. In the first week of January, on one wall of the room were 10 or 20 primitive drawings, results of the activity, each with a label and a sentence beneath. These were fun, meaningful activities to the boys.

> We had done it one or twice. It was actually a sign that they were ready for a more formal writing program. They were loving this activity and doing well at it...They wanted to write their own sentences, they didn't want me to write them...

There were other signs that they were ready for a formal writing program, ready to abandon the free-flow, pre-school schedule of the afternoon and participate in an organized activity. Probably the most interesting indication was their request to write and make books of their own.

> They wanted to make books. They were very interested in words and writing and wanted to do it themselves. "I can write that word! I want to write that word!" [They made] more careful drawings and pictures and [were] more able to sit still and work on a product like this, a more representative picture...[they were] able to not sit down and scribble for a few minutes, but to draw a picture that tells a story and then have a story to tell about it.

The process had begun back in November, in the darker period of the classroom. Anne had notice that, on occasion, a boy would ask to make a book during his free choice time. She hesitated then to push the idea of setting up a formal time to write books. She decided instead to let the excitement of making books brew and build. Whenever an opportunity came up informally though, she jumped on it. If the boys showed particular interest in the animals, or a book they had read, or dinosaurs, Anne would stage an impromptu writing lesson during the afternoon period. After visiting the museum, for instance, Anne made a picture book out of the photos she had taken of them at the museum. Before assembling the pages and binding them, she conducted a successful group lesson wherein the boys told what they were doing in each photo, and what they liked best about the experience. The book was bound and read to the whole class the next day and ceremonially put on the class bookshelf. The boy's were very excited. Then she helped them to write a group thank-you letter to the museum.

> ...it seemed like too good an opportunity to pass up! That they had been really excited...so I wanted to be able to capitalize on these things happening and to get them to do this [writing]...as an initial step...if they're gonna be able to do it [writing] at all they'll be able to do it best when there's something they're really excited about.

With opportunity after opportunity, Anne planned activities to match the children's interest with salient activities from her already existing cache of ideas. These lessons worked somewhat better; they were unlike the unfortunate apple lesson of the first weeks of school. She listened and watched more carefully before she instituted many of her lessons. She waited, "looking for the clue from them that they were ready to do it." She didn't know when the clues would come, did not have a very specific plan. She knew she wanted the older three boys writing their own stories by June, and the younger two boys to be dictating whole stories, at least. She also knew that she wanted their first writing experiences to be fun ones; she did not want to be responsible for turning out students who did not "value their own creative expression."

By waiting for the "clues" from children and following their lead, Anne ran the risk of not covering adequately the material necessary for each boy's advancement in writing. In the case of her writing curriculum, there is no written or set standard for what children should learn in the first grade, or any grade. It seems that without those standards, she would fall into the trap of only doing what is interesting to the boys and not necessarily what they need. However, this did not happen. In fact, the boys did learn to write full sentences, to capitalize and punctuate, to have stories that began and ended with a degree of finesse. Spelling was not a large concern to Anne at this level of work, but legibility and completeness were. She was able to accomplish the curriculum goals because she *understood the goals* so well. The materials used, the scope and sequence of a writing curriculum, were not as salient to Anne as the end goals. If Anne had followed a prescribed sequence of steps, she would have run the risk of imposing a structure on the children that they would have rejected. Instead, she sought out their interests, and applied her knowledge and skills to those interests, gently shaping the direction of the curriculum toward her goals.

## Structure

By April, the number of serious or violent episodes in Anne's class had decreased substantially in the classroom. Most of the difficulties that did arise still happened during transitional periods, when the activity was least clear and least interesting. In those times, the children would focus on each other instead of on an interesting activity; they would use their energy to tease and taunt each other instead of on "salient things." Still, there

was less disruption, and as a result, the amount of actual time spent on content instruction had increased. The class seemed to have found a structure in which the boys could live and learn with less problem and more productivity.

"Structure" in this class was the result of a dynamic and shifting interplay between the boys, Anne, and the content -- mediated by her observation, listening, and reflection. She began her work with this group of children by analyzing them, their histories, their behavioral patterns, their likes and dislikes. She claimed she was "cerebral" and intellectualized much of what she saw. But her analysis did not remain an abstraction. She acted on what she saw, experimented to see if her hypotheses were valid or not. At the same time, she was constantly monitoring her own feelings and thoughts, as well as the effect she had on the children. She has a large fund of knowledge, both theoretical and practical, about child development and emotional disturbance. However, that knowledge did not constrict her judgement, she was not bound to a particular theory or mode of operation. Perhaps the knowledge that guided her most was knowing that skill development in children varies widely both between and within children. She was, therefore, frustrated this year and at the same time challenged by the differences the children presented. Yet, because she thinks about teaching as she does, she was free to be open to new possibilities in how and what she taught.

One could theorize that not only had the form and content of the day acquired structure, but the interaction of the people in the room had acquired a structure, as well. The teacher knew what she could expect from the boys, and they had come to expect certain things from the teacher. There was predictability in knowing that boys could come up with exciting ideas, their own ideas, and that the teacher would respond and help turn the ideas into actions. It took time and practice to start to realize that the classroom was more fun and more rewarding than being in trouble. Simultaneously, the boys could rely on the fact that certain of their behaviors would elicit certain responses from the adults. That, too, took time and practice. As Anne said,

> I think in some ways, when I do look back on the year as a whole, I will say the first three months were spent getting the kids comfortable with the concept of being civilized in a classroom setting. It took that long to have them feel safe in a class and be able to contain themselves well enough to start doing anything else.

She had made the classroom a civilized setting and had started doing more academic work by early spring. By no means had she completely solved her problems with the structure of the classroom. That would require that she had solved the problems the boys have and she knows that is hardly possible -- at least in one year. Her classroom structure will continue to change and be rearranged in response to the needs of the boys. She is convinced that only by responding to the boys emotional needs will she teach the boys well, academically and socially. At the same time as she responds to their emotional needs, she is convinced that she must hold the overarching goals of literacy and pro-social behavior firm, keep them clearly in focus.

Too often, and in classrooms of all kinds, "structure" is viewed as something independent of specific situations. It is seen as something that can be designed *a priori* and executed consistently over time regardless of context: Structure is found in the scope and sequence of curricula or is determined by either the text or program that is being used, or by rules set by administrative individuals other than the teacher. In Special Education programs and publications for educators of emotionally disturbed children, "structure" is fully equated with the use of applied behavioral techniques for teaching disturbed children: Structure is formed by analyzing tasks, scripting learning, and using directive teaching methods. Anne's teaching suggests that predetermined curricula and the use of applied behavioral techniques are necessary but insufficient to establishing structure in the education of emotionally and behaviorally unpredictable children. Her successful teaching suggests that structure in classrooms may be less external and immutable and more grounded in the particular classroom context. Structure is *found* in a classroom; it requires teachers to watch closely how students learn best and then to modify tasks to the children's cognitive, behavioral, social, and emotional patterns. It demands that teachers learn flexible, creative ways of thinking about reaching academic goals. It challenges them to focus less on reducing time-honored learning tasks to ever smaller units and re-teaching them using pre-conceived methods; it relies more on *finding a way* to teach the content that is fresh and "salient" to the learners *and* reaches academic goals as well. Anne's experience demonstrates that this way of teaching is difficult, but not impossible, and it deserves further study.

## Appendix A: Researcher's Role and Method

I have a long-standing interest in the ways in which teachers teach disturbed children. For 14 years, I taught junior high and high school aged youngsters who were in some sort of separated setting as a result of behavioral or emotional difficulties. For the last eight of those years, I have worked at Brighton School. During the first three, I was the teacher in the oldest classroom, teaching 12 and 13 year old boys. For the next three years, I was a program director with primary responsibility for the older three of the six classes. Additionally, I was the coordinator of special education services, responsible for calling and chairing all Evaluations and Annual Reviews, and negotiating any contractual difficulties that arose with sending school districts or agencies. I have continued in that role, part time, for the last two years.

Thus, conducting this study, I have had the benefit of knowing what it is like to teach at the school, to design and implement curricula, to be part of a treatment team, to handle crises. I have also had the benefit of knowing the institution from a management perspective, and have an understanding of the school's internal workings, as well as its position in the larger community. At the same time, my more limited role in the past two years has provided me with necessary distance, a budding objectivity that has helped in sorting the data. In my role as researcher, I have been a fully acclimated participant-observer.

For all my experience within the institution, I have had limited contact with Anne over the years, except around certain administrative business. When I undertook the present study, I approached her because I did not know her well, and moreover, because I have little expertise in the teaching of young children.

I was interested in how Anne's thinking and practice evolved over a full year, and she was gracious enough to grant me permission to videotape one instructional period of her day consistently throughout the entire year, with occasional observations of larger parts of the day. Together, we viewed the tape and had conversations after each session. At first these conversations were unstructured, but gained more structure as the year progressed and themes were uncovered. Anne chose a language arts/writing as the instructional period to be observed. The students who were in her class were all non-readers and non-writers, and she knew that this period would be a great challenge for her; she thought that it would be a good example of how she developed curriculum and how she taught.

Videotaping took place at least once per month, and sometimes twice. I used a hand-held, battery-operated video camera to allow maximum freedom of movement in the classroom space. The classroom space is oddly shaped, and instruction or activities take place at various places within it. The use of a tripod would have prohibited documenting many activities, as well as disallowing a number of perspective on the scene. My freer movement about the class also allowed me to work on being a natural member of the group, to move fluidly with them during transitions, but especially during violent episodes.

Usually in the afternoon of the videotaping session, after the last class of the day, Anne and I would meet to view the tape together and to discuss whatever came to mind as she watched. These sessions were audio taped. My goal was to locate the recurring themes in Anne's thinking, the salient emotional and cognitive aspects of her as a practitioner. Thus, I would often stop the tape and ask her to describe what she was thinking or feeling. These discussions of immediate, concrete feelings and thoughts would invariably lead to discussions of larger, more abstract philosophical and practical thoughts on teaching and learning with disturbed children. In later sessions, more semi-structured interview were used to investigate Anne's personal history, her perceptions of her place in the Brighton institution as a whole, her professional relationship with her colleagues, and her philosophy of teaching.

## Appendix B: School Organization

Between 50 and 54 boys aged 5 - 12 attend the school, some stay for as short as one year and others as long as five. The average length of stay is three years. Boys have come to Brighton through one of three routes: through recommendation of a Special Education evaluation at the local school level because of pervasive emotional and learning problems; through the Department of Social Services (D.S.S.) because they are in need of care and protection; or by the recommendation of both agencies. Local Educational Agencies (LEA) will fund the placement of children either as day students or as residents. Chapter 766, the Massachusetts special education law, is non-categorical so that children are not labelled in special education by a specific handicap. Rather, children receive services in an amount and of a type commensurate with their need. Placement in a 502.5 prototype program means that a child's special needs are so great as to necessitate his or her placement in a special, private program for the full school day. Children in a 502.6 program presumably have special needs requiring 24 hour care. Thus, children at Brighton are said to be in either a 502.5 or a 502.6 prototype. Often, D.S.S. shares with the LEA the cost and responsibility of placement of a child in residential treatment. In these cases, the child usually is in clear need of a day placement for their education, not 24 hour educational treatment, yet are under the care and protection of D.S.S. A minority of children are placed in residential treatment solely through the action of D.S.S. Currently, children from thirty-two different towns in Massachusetts are attending the school and there is a wide variability of family background, social status, and income.

There are, on average, twenty day students and thirty residents at any one time. Most students who are residents will become day students as part of their transition home, usually after two years of residential treatment. Others, particularly those whose care and protection is still in question, or those who are without a family or at legal risk of losing their family, will remain as residents until new families are found or they are no longer of age to remain.

Three major components comprise the treatment milieu: educational, child care, and clinical. Staff from each discipline form treatment teams for each child and have major responsibility for the on-going care and planning for him.

Within the educational component of the milieu, there are six classrooms divided by age cluster and learning needs. As mentioned before, within every classroom, three adults work: a master teacher, an assistant teacher (who is often a full-time Master's Degree intern seeking certification from a local college), and a child care worker. The four older classes have ten students, there are seven in the next to youngest class and five students in the youngest class.